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English Language Learning by Blind and Visually Impaired Individuals in Inclusive Setting: Access To Study Material

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Abstract

This study is part of my PhD research and it investigates the issue of access to study material by BVI learners in an inclusive education environment. This qualitative, phenomenological study employs in-depth interviews as tool for data collection. The purposive sample consisted of fifteen participants, including ten BVI students and their five sighted teachers. The study employs Oliver's (2013) Social Model of Disability to investigate both external and internal factors underlying The BVI learners' attempts at accessing the written word. The collected data is transcribed and thematically analysed. The findings suggest that the students experience difficulties in accessing study materials, as the practices, dominant in the system, are majority oriented and marginalize the students with visual impairment. The BVI students, despite confronting such barriers, try to get on with their studies employing their individualized coping mechanisms to overcome these obstacles.

Keywords: *Accessibility, Blind And Visually Impaired, English Language Learning*

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1.Introduction

Inclusion refers to the notion of becoming a part of a structure (Ashraf et al., 2017). Inclusive education refers to the concept of including students with different needs in regular schools. Such a system ensures the promotion of a culture celebrating differences and similarities. When the notion of differences is also focused upon, it justifies and promotes the concepts of equity and inclusive education. This idea of differences and similarities enables teachers to devise their teaching and evaluation method accordingly. According to Tefera (2005, p. 108), "inclusion requires a lot of struggle and commitment to overcome attitudinal and social barriers." Though "Education for All" is the motto of the country, creating equal opportunities and ensuring the blind and visually impaired (henceforth "BVI") students' participation in an integrated English language class are very limited. Inclusive education provides a chance to the normal people and to the people having disabilities to socialize with each other. It is generally viewed as recognizing the rights of special people by making them a part of mainstream education.

Visual impairment is a broad term. It includes vision loss and deficiencies with varying degrees. Total blindness is the phenomenon wherein individuals have completely lost their vision, i.e. they have no light perception (AFB, 2022). Partially seeing are those who can read large print but generally have to switch over to Brailed materials and talking books like fully blind learners as they experience severe headaches, especially after reading for longer periods of time. Thus, the challenges faced by visually impaired learners in their academic pursuits are by and large similar to those confronted by blind learners.

Generally, all visual impairment has one thing in common: it renders the visually impaired individual print-challenged. Thus, when a person's vision is deficient to such an extent that she/he can't function effectively in his academic and daily life, he is declared legally blind and visually impaired (MDE 2020).

BVI learners need special materials, equipment and assistive technology to overcome their sight-related challenges (Bardin & Lewis, 2008). The students depending upon the degree of their impairment have different needs which can be addressed by adaptation of teaching and learning methods considering the type of impairment. Papadopoulos et al. (2008) assert that visually impaired students cannot practice their language skills, as they can only read and write in Braille. Since they cannot see, they cannot read or write the text normally. For blind people, every image and gesture needs to be translated into words (Attachoo & Sitthitikul, 2020).

The recent trends in research for BVI students mainly focus on the teachers' perceptions of services for BVI students in regular classroom environment (Al-Ayoudi,

2006; Wungu & Han, 2008); the impact of blindness on the cognitive abilities of BVI learners with regard to second language learning (Smeds, H., 2015); educating them in regular classroom settings (Bishaw, 2013; Janae, 2017; Murray, & McKenzie, 2010; Simon, Echeita, Scandoval, & Lopez, 2010); characteristics of their learning styles under the impact of assistive technology (Hussin, 2013; Nguyo, 2015; Padure, 2011); and teachers' competence for teaching BVI students (Smith, Kelley, Maushak, Griffin-Shirley, & Lan, 2009). These and other studies have investigated learning in general by BVI learners from various perspectives, but no study, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, investigating specifically access to study material by BVI learners of English has been done so far, and it is for this reason that the researcher undertook the task of investigating this area. Tobin's (2011) opinion is still valid, who, along with Orini-Jones (2009) and Topor and Rosenblum et al (2013) argued for extensive research into the field of second language learning by BVI individuals.

1.1. Research questions

The study seeks answers to the following questions:

I. How do the BVI students access the written word?
II. What strategies do they adopt as they cannot read the normal print?

2. Theoretical Framework

For this research, the Social Model of Disability Theory presented by Mike Oliver (2013) was used. Oliver (2013) was himself a disabled academic, and he coined the term 'social model of disability' in 1983. Initially the model was used for people with physical impairment only. Later, all types of people having different types of impairments which also include people having learning difficulties were included (Oliver, 2013). The framework deals with the barriers faced by visually challenged learners. It divides the barriers into four categories: first, attitudes: second, materials: third, untrained teachers: fourth, financial issues (Nthama & Annie, 2019).

This framework posits that these four factors influence the learning positively or negatively. The negative attitude of the teachers and learners create hindrances and negatively impacts the learners with visual impairment. Materials refer to the Braille, embossed texts, or electric notes. Absence of such materials becomes a hurdle in their learning process. Untrained teachers with no expertise to deal with such students also impact their learning negatively. Further, financial resources refer to the financial reserves that can be used to assist such students. Lack of funds results in a crisis for visually

challenged learners. The theoretical framework is highly relevant to the study, as it deals with visual impairment, inclusive education and learning.

The social model of disability posits that the barriers that exist are not the result of the disability; they cannot be attributed to the unsound medical condition of the individual. The disabled individuals face challenges because of the unsound social environment. In other words, it is not their impairment which makes them disabled, rather the social structures render them incapacitated. In the light of this model, impairment is defined as a functional limitation due to mental, physical or sensory conditions that are distinct from regular norms within an individual. Conversely, disability is a restriction caused by an institution, organization or society which excludes individuals based on their impairments from performing and participating in the social activities with their counterparts. Therefore, society imposes disability by not providing opportunities and facilities to the visually challenged learners, thus hindering their participation in the social activities to their full potential. In this way, society –transforms their impairment into disability.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study tried to study participants in their natural environment using different means to interpret meanings shared by the study participants. Qualitative research generally aims to understand the way people comprehend the world from different aspects, and accepts the varied interpretations of human experience; both the researchers as well as the study participants thus have a discovering experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study used a qualitative approach because of various reasons, as enumerated by Creswell (2018)): (a) when research questions begin with how, what and why, (b) there are multiple aspects to the issue under study which need investigation, and (c) the study has to be carried out in a natural environment. The researcher believes that the blind and visually impaired students' views about the world around them and the realities they draw, and construct can best be understood through a qualitative approach.

The research population for this study consisted of blind and visually challenged students, whose ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-two years. A comprehensive list of BVI students enrolled in Islamic International University and National University of Modern Languages was obtained from these universities. Ten BVI students were selected through the process of purposive sampling. The BVI students were contacted and their willingness to participate in this study obtained through consent forms.

For this study, semi-structured interview was considered appropriate because through this type of interview the researcher could glean from the participants maximum relevant information. Moreover, this type of interview enabled the participants to freely

express their views. A set of questions was developed (which was in line with the main research question and the research objectives) and put before the participants during the interviews which lasted on average for around one hour. In line with the views of Smith and Osborn (2008), a relaxed atmosphere was created so as to allow the study participants to share their views regarding the role of assistive technology in their English language studies, and whenever needed, cues were provided to them when they appeared to get stuck.

Before finalising the interview guide, however, a pilot study was conducted with two BVI students, and certain changes (e.g., minimising technical terms and reordering certain questions for the sake of smooth flow in conversation) were made in accordance with the outcomes of the study. Data was then collected from ten blind and visually impaired students through semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were audio-taped through a smartphone and a laptop.

The student participants used a mixture of both Urdu and English to express their views. The researcher then translated and transcribed all the interviews into English. My knowledge of both Urdu and English and my position as an insider (I am myself a blind individual having the experience of using assistive technology, especially computer-based, to study English language) proved very effective with regard to understanding their views and perceiving the contextual as well as cultural nuances associated with their responses.

Major themes were established through a thematic analysis of the data. Moreover, validity and reliability of the study was established through interpretative and descriptive validity, using such strategies like member check sessions and low-inference descriptors.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

All the BVI study participants termed the availability of study material in some accessible format as absolutely essential for successful English language learning.

Although the secondary material could be found online, but the material used in classes could not be found on the internet. They regretted the fact that the primary study material used in class was available neither in braille nor in any other accessible format at the university, and consequently they had to manage it on their own.

The BVI students are supposed to make the study material accessible themselves either by converting the hard printed material into soft form through scanning, so that they can listen to them with a screen reader installed on their laptop, or ask a friend to audiotape it for them, or obtain the converted materials from a senior BVI student who might have made it accessible through the above two procedures. But the scanned materials almost

invariably contained typographical errors (mainly because of the poor print quality of the material handed to students, and, to a lesser extent, because of some technical issues in the softwares, tools and gadgets used by BVI students) and consequently the BVI students found it hard to make sense out of it. In such cases, the BVI student relied only on listening during class proceedings which often results in their having a fairly rudimentary knowledge of English language. If the university could not provide the study material in accessible format, at least it should take steps to ensure the print quality of the textbooks. Till the compilation of this research report, the university's administration has failed to make the study material accessible for the BVI learners of English.

It is for this very reason that the BVI students are forced to seek the assistance of a sighted individual for removing those typographical errors, and thus, improving their comprehensibility level. But the issue of reliance on others carries psychological implications for BVI students. They feel dependent on others and less psychologically secured. Moreover, based on my own experience, I can safely say that their motivation level significantly reduces when they are confronted with the challenge of accessibility. Their interest in class begins to flag. The otherwise very confident and self-assured BVI individuals (when facing no accessibility issues) could easily become timid, less sure of their abilities, shy, less eager to participate in class activities, psychologically brittle and more detached.

The problem of the non-availability of the study material persisted even in specialized schools for BVI students, where they were forced to share one braille textbook among several students. This was one of the main reasons for BVI students' lagging behind their sighted peers in their academic endeavours. They had to ensure the availability of the study material on their own (by asking someone to audio-record them for them); neither the administration nor their teachers considered it their responsibility to help them in this regard.

It is true that material related to almost every aspect of English language could be easily found online, but the material they used in the class was not available on the net on account of copyright issues. As a result, BVI students had no option but to make this study material accessible to themselves. But the poor print quality of the textbooks (as has been pointed out above), the presence of pictures, maps and charts, and tables etc., in these books made them very difficult to be properly converted into soft form through scanning. Consequently, in terms of class participation and overall learning, they found it very difficult to keep pace with their sighted peers in the integrated class.

In order to ensure the BVI students' equal participation in class and success in language study, all the teachers emphasized the importance of the timely availability of

study material to them in accessible formats. The teachers were of the view that if the BVI students had their study material in braille or any other accessible format just as their sighted peers had theirs in print, and if they had the same opportunities to participate and follow along in class, they would be able to succeed like their sighted classmates. They acknowledged, however, that it is the students' responsibility to make the study material accessible to themselves as the university mainly focus on the sighted students and could not cater to their needs in this regard.

One solution they offered was that teachers should prepare their lessons at least one week ahead of time and inform their BVI students so as to enable them to render the study material accessible for themselves. Some teachers tried to make amends by downloading and providing the BVI students with the secondary materials in accessible formats so that they could study on their own, but the issue of access to the primary material still remained to be resolved. Others attempted to address the issue by pairing their BVI student with their sighted classmate, believing somewhat erroneously that if a visually challenged student is paired up with a sighted classmate, they could function as efficiently as a sighted student, but the problem of dependency and its consequent implications could not be averted. Moreover, they appeared to believe that it is the BVI students' own responsibility (at least till the time when the administration assumes this charge) to make the study material accessible to themselves. The BVI students could experience severe frustration which may result in high levels of anxiety and low motivation, especially when they have difficulties in finding the study material in accessible format.

The awareness on the part of sighted teachers of the study material used by BVI students is crucial in order to ensure its quality. It can be tricky especially when the student uses brailled material, as the teachers generally have no idea about braille, and hence are in no position to determine its quality. In such cases the teachers hardly have any idea with regard to the grammatical, lexical or punctuational quality of the material. Such issue can be resolved either through the teachers' familiarity with the braille (an ideal situation) or the students' familiarity with modern computer-based assistive technology and its use for making his study material accessible for his sighted teachers' perusal.

Access to study material can serve as great equalizer, as the BVI students can easily compete with their sighted peers as long as the former have their study materials available to them in braille or other accessible format. They would hardly lag behind their sighted peers in doing their homework and submitting their assignments, and would be able to function independently. They would be in a position to accommodate their teachers instead of waiting for their teachers to accommodate them.

4.1. Major findings

This study revealed that the majority of BVI students faced problems accessing the printed word. As has been mentioned elsewhere, BVI learners generally use kinaesthetic and auditory strategies for accessing information. They have to employ alternative means to gain access to information which is available so easily to their sighted peers.

The study material used in class was particularly hard to access, as it was available neither in braille nor in any other accessible format at the university, and consequently, the BVI students had to manage it on their own. The BVI students tried to make it accessible for themselves, either by converting the hard printed material into soft form through scanning, so that they can listen to them with a screen reader installed on their laptops, or ask a friend to audiotape it for them, or obtain the converted materials from a senior BVI student who might have made it accessible through the above two procedures. The problems did not end there: the study material made accessible Thus, was not free of typographical errors. As Ahmad, Arshad, Sami and Hassan confirmed, the scanned materials almost invariably contained many typographical errors which made it sometimes hard to make sense out of.

The poor print quality of the textbooks, the presence of pictures, maps and charts, and tables etc., in these books made them very difficult to be properly converted into soft form through scanning. A text containing too many typographical errors often lead to cognitive overload and lack of comprehension. This is one of the main reasons that BVI readers generally took more time to make sense of written texts, and often, they fail to properly comprehend the ideas contained in it.

The BVI learners were forced to make the converted texts free of typographical errors for enhanced comprehension. For this purpose, they sought the assistance of a sighted individual for removing those errors, which made them dependent on others, something the majority of them despised to do, as it hurt them both mentally and psychologically. Moreover, the sighted individuals, according to the student participants, were generally very hard to persuade to undertake the task of proof-reading such converted documents, on account of its arduous, tedious and time-consuming nature , which required the entire document to be read through word-for-word. The problem of accessibility seemed to exist Even in specialized schools for BVI individuals where students did not have enough study material and were forced to share one braille textbook among several students, as some student participants confirmed.

Secondary study material about almost every aspect of English language (one of the world most extensively described language) is available online and can be accessed

through computers and smartphones equipped with screen readers by BVI students, but the primary material used in classes were not available in accessible format. The main in-class tasks and activities as well as the majority of home assignments were almost entirely based on that primary material. Consequently, in terms of class participation and overall learning, those BVI students who had difficulties accessing the study material found it very difficult to keep pace with their sighted peers in the integrated classes.

Accessing the written word is one of the major challenges faced by the BVI learners, and it is something that distinguishes the visually challenged students from individuals with other disabilities. The success of BVI learners greatly depends on their ability to access the study material used in class. It has to be made available in appropriate format (e.g. e-text, braille, audio and large print, etc.) at the same level and at the same time. Although modern assistive technology has facilitated them to a large extent to access the printed material, and BVI learners of English can read electronic books and browse the Internet with the help of JAWS for Windows (a screen reader), and partially sighted students can use Zoomtext (a computer application) for magnifying any e-text on their computer, yet their problems in accessing the written word, as this study established, were far from over. Some of those problems have been mentioned above. The BVI student participants who did not have the study material in any accessible format were compelled to devote a lot of precious time in getting the printed material converted and thus a great deal of time was waisted which put them at a disadvantage as compared with their sighted peers. The sighted students, on the other hand, had a ready access to the study material. Ironically, as this study shows, in integrated classroom setting, the BVI students were expected to submit their assignments on time like their sighted peers. They were made to go through a lot of psychological stress in integrated classes, as they not only had to grapple with their visual impairment, but also deal with and overcome the barriers erected by the social structures.

The study also revealed that students who did not know (or did not want) how to use modern assistive technology faced considerable problems in accessing the written word. Apart from other factors, one main reasons behind Sanan's failure to successfully complete his English language course was his inability to access the written word because of his inability to use modern assistive technology.

Familiarity with and use of assistive technology, however, does not ensure hundred percent access to the written word. As this study revealed, students could not access phonemic symbols and graphics through the screen readers they used.

The problem of access to the study material could not be readily resolved; it warrants long-term and enduring planning at the institutional level. The BVI students did

try to solve this issue in individual capacity, but every new BVI student confronted the same challenge again and again. The universities need to make the primary study material used in class available in some accessible format (e.g. braille, audiotapes and e-text), and the BVI students should be given access to the same type of material and opportunities as their sighted peers.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

As the findings of the study show, since the BVI student and their teachers had to deal with some very basic issues on daily basis (e.g. improper classroom behaviour, access to the study materials, the timely submission of class assignments and accomplishing in-class tasks and activities), they could not focus their attention on pedagogical strategies.

Keeping this observation in view, I have come to the conclusion that it would be hard for the BVI students to achieve a level playing field in the process of learning a second language until the basic educational issues confronting them are adequately addressed first. I believe it is essential for all those involved in the BVI students' second language learning process to address the more fundamental educational challenges confronted by them before considering the actual pedagogical issues related to English language learning and teaching. In the light of this study, I would advance certain recommendations for the BVI students of English language, their teachers and any administrator, related in any way to the BVI students' English language learning experience.

The success of BVI learners greatly depends on their ability to access the study material used in class, and they should utilise all means to gain access to study material, instead of waiting for the administration or others to provide it for them. Modern computer-based assistive technology can be of immense help in this regard. Secondary study material about almost every aspect of English language (one of the world most extensively described language) is available online and can be accessed through computers and smartphones equipped with screen readers by BVI students, and the primary material used in classes could be make accessible through modern assistive technology. Moreover, they can seek the assistance of their seniors as well, as it is quite likely that they would have already made it accessible for themselves.

Apart from computer-based assistive technology, the BVI students should explore and use other avenues in their studies as well (e.g. braille, live readers, and real audios etc.) It is essential for BVI students to diversify their means for accessing the written word.

The administrators should establish a separate corner for the BVI students in the central library which has study material accessible in various formats. I believe that this

proactive approach may help administrators to have a working knowledge of the challenges confronted, and capabilities possessed, by BVI students.

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